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Go Local: Building Capacity for Public History in York County, Maine

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## **Introduction**

In August 2017, York County Community College (YCCC), in Wells, Maine, was awarded a \$21,000 Digital Humanities Advancement planning grant aimed at expanding capacity for public history in York County, Maine through professional development and strengthening of local networks. The grant funded two public history workshops; a needs assessment of the seven partner organizations; a project website; and curriculum development for a new humanities-based digital storytelling course at YCCC. The seven partner organizations included Brick Store Museum of Kennebunk; Kennebunk Free Library, Kittery Historical & Naval Museum; McArthur Library of Biddeford; Saco Museum; Wells-Ogunquit Historical Society; and Wells Reserve at Laudholm Farm.

## **Grant activities**

### **1. Workshops**

Two professional development workshops aimed at developing knowledge of public history tools, challenges, and possibilities took place on November 17, 2017 and May 11, 2018, both led by Project Scholars Dr. Candace Kanen and Dr. Jessica Parr. The Project Director worked with the Scholars and seven collaborating partners to design the agendas, and opened up the workshops to the statewide museum and archival community. All told, 38 individuals attended either one or both workshops, representing York County Community College (six attendees), the seven partners, and an additional 11 museums, archives, and libraries within York County and the state of Maine (see Appendix A for the list of all institutions).

The workshop agendas were designed with the knowledge that staff and volunteers at participating organizations had a range of expertise and included sessions on basic digitization; storytelling and storytelling tools (e.g. StoryMaps, Omeka); planning for the digital future/sustainability; and copyright and ownership issues in the digital arena, and also included opportunities for participants to share information about digital projects at their organizations (see Appendix B for both workshop agendas). Workshop evaluation, via a simple print form, demonstrated, for both workshops, that the “most beneficial and satisfying” aspects were “meeting & networking with humanities colleagues,” followed by “general information about public history methods and tools.”

Near the end of the grant period, funds were available to support a third half-day workshop in which eight participants met on November 30, 2018, to discuss plans for developing a York County History Trail (a very drafty version here: [www.yorkcountryhistorytrail.org](http://www.yorkcountryhistorytrail.org)), which will take the form of a website and provide a map and basic information about participating organizations. To date, 11 organizations have expressed an interest in the History Trail, which will be aimed, in its first stages, at increasing awareness of York County-related historical organizations, and providing an easy-to-navigate format for web visitors and mobile device users to ‘find’ these organizations (see Appendix C for list of organizations to date). Long-term, the History Trail organizers hope to see the History Trail become a venue for exhibits, driving tours, and other ambitious plans to increase awareness of York County’s history and culture, and to increase visitation to local institutions.

## **2. Needs Assessment**

In March and April 2018, the Project Director completed a needs assessment of the seven partner organizations, visiting each one and interviewing staff and volunteers with a common list of questions to learn more about their institutions, needs, and experience with digital tools, platforms and applications. The assessment provided useful information about “the state of where things are,” and revealed some commonalities and many differences, especially in terms of staffing and expertise. With the exception of the Reserve at Laudholm Farm, a National Estuarine Research Reserve, the seven partners are small and underfunded institutions, and in some cases, rely heavily on volunteers (and at the Reserve, initiatives related to the history of the property are almost primarily volunteer-based). Yet within most of these organizations are tech-savvy or tech-interested staff and volunteers eager to take their museums and/or collections to the next level, in terms of public history.

For example, the special collections curator at the McArthur Public Library has developed a [Biddeford history](#) WordPress site that includes finding aids to manuscripts and collections and links to photo archives and other materials. Although primarily aimed at genealogists, the site is an excellent example of how something as simple as providing a set of digital finding aids makes history more public, to professional, student, and

hobbyist researchers. Baseball aficionados interested in exploring the “Richard ‘Dick’ Charles Baseball History Collection” will find a rich set of materials that document early 20<sup>th</sup> century baseball in Biddeford, including a tradition of local teams playing “colored” teams from as far away as Philadelphia and Florida, and, in 1905, a women’s team from Indiana.

At the Kittery Historical & Naval Museum, tech-savvy volunteers have developed a relational database in which users can search for names in town cemeteries, including many old family plots tucked away on private property. A second database allows visitors to search town history by date, name, event and other subjects. When users click on an event, such as the 1963 sinking of the Thresher submarine, text and photos display to provide more information about this internationally prominent and locally devastating event. Both of these databases are web-based and could be accessed remotely; however, the Museum has decided that these rich resources will remain internal and available to visitors when they come to the museum.

At the small museums, staff, volunteers, and governing boards primarily seek to increase visitation, as a small source of revenue, but more so for the opportunity to develop a membership base, which they can then build upon for fundraising, programming and other goals. They want to share collections and educate the public, with a focus on doing so at the museum. Some wonder if increased open digital access (e.g. via the web) to their collections might reduce motivation for visitation. Generally speaking, long-term planning around digital projects and sustainability is in its early stages.

### **3. Project Website**

The Project Director has developed a “Go Local” website via the college-provided LibGuide platform. The website, at [virtual.yccc.edu/go\\_local](http://virtual.yccc.edu/go_local), documents grant activity and also serves as an evolving digital humanities resource hub, with links to tools, tutorials, and other resources. Over the summer and fall of 2019, the Project Director plans to merge the materials in this website with another LibGuide website focused more specifically on digital tools, so that the website evolves into a robust digital humanities resource page aimed at faculty, museum professionals and volunteers, and others looking

for information on using digital tools for storytelling, pedagogy and research. The site will continue to include information about the Go Local project and NEH funding, including the Project White Paper, and the “Go Local” title will be embedded in the search terms so that the site is easily accessed by anyone seeking information about this particular NEH project. However, the Project Director believes that re-positioning the site as a local hub for digital humanities resources will make it easier to find and thereby expose the tools to a wider audience.

#### **4. Curriculum development**

During the grant period, the Project Director developed curriculum for a digital storytelling course organized around a historical theme. In spring 2019, the course was offered to students as a 100-level “Topics in History” course titled “Witches, War, and the Web,” with a focus on exploring connections between the Salem Witch Trials and Abenaki-colonial warfare on the Maine frontier. The Project Director planned to use entry-level mapping and storytelling tools to develop an exhibit that mapped various conflicts, and how they intersected with the Salem trials, and to have each student develop their own local history multimedia project. However, only four students registered for the course, and the college ultimately decided to cancel it.

The Humanities and English Departments are currently studying possibilities for a future version of the proposed course, for Spring 2020, which range from offering the course again with a revised title, to taking a different approach, such as offering a general digital storytelling course, or an introduction to digital tools in the humanities. The YCCC Liberal Studies degree includes a computer literacy course that most students fulfill by taking a basic computer applications course focused on Microsoft Office. We are now discussing whether the computer literacy requirement might be better utilized by exposing students to a range of digital humanities tools.

#### **Grant expenditures**

All grant funds were expended during the grant period, according to the original budget, with one formal change that supported scholar consultants for the third workshop and

planning for the York County History Trail. Major expenses included the Project Director stipend, consulting fees for the two scholar consultants, and workshop-related expenses.

### **Project evaluation**

Project evaluation occurred via print-based evaluation forms collected at the two workshops (discussed in previous reports), and via a follow-up electronic survey in February 2019 to workshop participants. The survey sought to gain insight into follow-up activities after the workshop (albeit the project director recognizes that the survey can't definitively establish a direct relationship to workshop participation). Obtaining responses to that survey has been challenging, although six of the seven original partners have responded, with the primary post-workshop activity being participation in the development of the York County History Trail.

### **“Go Local” impact**

Evaluating the impact of gathering local history professionals and volunteers together with community college staff and faculty is challenging to definitively determine. This grant has planted seeds in many organizations that will take time to germinate and flourish. As discussed, the grant has generated first steps towards a “[York County History Trail](#),” as well as discussion at the college about best practices for integrating digital tools and assignments into the humanities curriculum. Several partner organizations have begun strategic planning around digital initiatives and/or continued ongoing planning with more expertise about resources, challenges, and digital tools.

The grant and its activities also led faculty and staff at YCCC to develop another proposal, “Opening Digital Doors to the Humanities at YCCC,” to the NEH program, Humanities Initiatives at Community College, with a focus on integrating digital humanities assignments into a series of courses. The proposal ultimately was not funded, but generated excellent discussions and ideas, as well as the integration of digital assignments into several courses on an ad-hoc basis. Humanities faculty are now considering a revised proposal for another application period.

Other ancillary impacts are that the Project Director, through her involvement in this project, has had the opportunity to develop her expertise and to expand her network within the regional and national digital humanities community, and, in turn, to share that evolving expertise here in Maine, for example, through a presentation on StoryMaps at the November 2018 Maine Archives and Museums annual conference, and by facilitating an online Maine Digital Humanities Institute this winter, in which 10 individuals worked together to build digital expertise, including three participants from the Go Local workshops. In October 2019, she plans to present a poster session at the Two-Year College Association (TYCA) Northeast Regional conference on digital humanities assignments integrated into three different courses at YCCC.

In conclusion, “going local” has stimulated conversations about public history and the use of digital technologies to make local history more visible and more accessible to a wider audience. The grant has also served to develop a local network of museum, library, faculty and volunteers, and this network will help to sustain and leverage additional projects, such as the York County History Trail, in years to come.

## **Appendix A: Organizations represented at 2017-2018 Go Local workshops**

Brick Store Museum, Kennebunk, Maine  
Brunswick Naval Museum, Brunswick, Maine  
Denmark Historical Society, Denmark, Maine  
Hiram Historical Society, Hiram, Maine  
Kennebunk Free Library, Kennebunk, Maine  
Kittery Historical & Naval Museum, Kittery, Maine  
Maine's First Ship Museum, Bath, Maine  
Maine State Library, Augusta, Maine  
McArthur Library, Biddeford, Maine  
Old Berwick Historical Society, South Berwick, Maine  
Penobscot Marine Museum, Searsport, Maine  
Saco Museum, Saco, Maine  
Sanford-Springvale Historical Society  
Swans Island Museum/Island Institute, Swans Island, Maine  
Wells-Ogunquit Historical Society  
Wells Reserve at Laudholm, Wells, Maine  
York County Community College, Wells, Maine



## Appendix B: Workshop Agendas



### **Go local: Building capacity for public history in York County, Maine Spring Workshop, Friday, May 11, 2018 9 a.m.-3 p.m.**

#### **Welcome**

**9-9:45 a.m.**

**Facilitator:** Dr. Dianne Fallon

What's happening, digitally speaking, in York County? Public history is happening now in a variety of media and methods. We will review terrific models for "going public" in York County, including the Kittery History Timeline and Facebook page at the Kittery Naval & Historical Society; the Walker Diaries of the Kennebunk Free Library; and the Biddeford History Digital Portal at the McArthur Public Library, among others.

#### **Hands-learning workshops (select one)**

**10:00 a.m.-noon**

(Informal coffee break at 10:30 a.m.)

#### **Session A: Digitization A-Z**

**Facilitator:** Dr. Candace Kanes

This workshop will build upon the fall workshop, Introduction to Digitization. Participants should bring a small selection of texts or photos and a thumb drive to work with. Topics to be covered may range from developing a digital collection policy to help prioritize and organize digital projects, using technical standards and metadata to enhance collections, and other related subjects. The workshop will also explore the difference between various free digital repositories, and how and why an organization might utilize them for different purposes.

#### **Session B: Telling stories with StoryMaps** **Presenter:** Dr. Jessica Parr

In this hands-on session, participants will explore [StoryMaps](#), an online tool for combining maps with narrative text, images, and multimedia content tool. Participants will take away a good grasp of how to use StoryMaps as well as a sense of the power of mapping tools. These tools vary in complexity, and may require significant user expertise. But anyone can use StoryMaps. To get the most out of this workshop, bring a small

collection (i.e. four to five items) of personal or archival digital items and an idea for a story they might tell.

**Lunch & Networking**

**12 -1 p.m.**

**Copyright, ownership & the “freemium” benefit**

**1-2 p.m.**

**Presenters:** Drs. Candace Kanes & Jessica Parr

Digitization often generates questions related to copyright, ownership and intellectual property. How do small organizations deal with these questions in the digital arena? Should digitized materials be freely available to whoever wishes to use them? What are the pros and cons in this area? Are there potential “freemium” benefits to making digital collections public?

**Wrap-up: Looking forward**

**2-2:45 p.m.**

**Facilitator:** Dr. Dianne Fallon

Drawing upon the presenters and our audience, we will share information on NEH and IMLS funding opportunities for community historical and archival organizations, such as the Common Heritage program, Community Conversations program, and other grant categories. If enough interest exists, we may be able to offer a fall workshop aimed at developing an application for a community-based project.

**Go local: Building capacity for public history in York County,  
Maine Fall Workshop, November 17, 2017 9 a.m.—3:15 p.m.**

**Introductions**

**9-10 a.m.**

**Facilitator:** Dr. Dianne Fallon

Introducing the grant and each other. What is your organization doing in “digital humanities”, or what would you like to do? To what extent are collections digitized, and what methods are participants using to organize and catalog digital collections? What “next steps” would organizations like to take: digital displays, exhibits, database development, website?

**Digital Storytelling: Designing an Online Exhibit**

**10-11:45 a.m.**

**Presenters:** Drs. Candace Kanes and Jessica Parr

What makes for an engaging online exhibit? How can you use your digital collections to tell a story? We will discuss these questions and also present an overview of some easy-to-use tools useful for organizing and displaying online exhibits.

**Lunch & Networking**

**11:45 a.m.-1 p.m.**

**Breakout sessions****1--2:15 p.m.****Session A: Introduction to digitization: starting from the bottom up****Presenter:** Dr. Candace Kanes

This session is aimed at participants whose organizations are just beginning to digitize collections. How do you prioritize which photos, documents or artifacts to digitize? What organizing principles can help to create collections that “make sense” to users? What technologies are available for digitization? How can technical standards and metadata enhance the ability to access and use the collections for research and exhibitions? How might crowdsourcing help make digitization easier and more efficient?

**Session B: Planning for the digital future****Presenter:** Dr. Jessica Parr

What kind of long-term digital sustainability issues do organizations need to consider, e.g. how to protect and preserve collections that may be hosted by other entities, anticipating technological changes in collection storage and organization strategies, and strategies for keeping pace with constant change?

**Wrap-up: looking to the spring workshop****2:30—3:15 p.m.****Facilitator:** Dr. Dianne Fallon

We will share thoughts on “takeaways” and gather information about what participants are interested in for the spring workshop: Specific topics? Ideas for NEH grant planning?

## **Appendix C: York County History Trail organizations, to date**

Biddeford Cultural Center

Biddeford Historical Society

Brick Store Museum, Kennebunk, Maine

Kennebunk Free Library, Kennebunk, Maine

Kittery Historical & Naval Museum, Kittery, Maine

McArthur Library, Biddeford, Maine

Old Berwick Historical Society, South Berwick, Maine

Saco Museum, Saco, Maine

Wells-Ogunquit Historical Society

Wells Reserve at Laudholm, Wells, Maine

York County Community College, Wells, Maine